

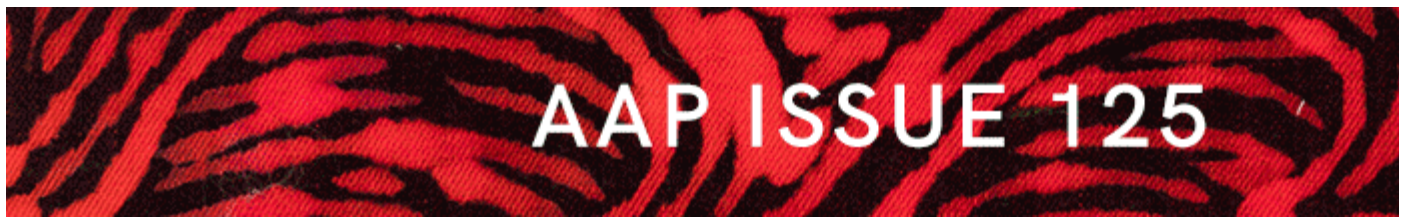
**ArtAsiaPacific**



**MICHIKO ITATANI**, *Personal Codes from Cosmic Cube 2019-K-16*, 2019, gouache, ink, and Prismacolor on board, 20.3 × 20.3 cm. All images courtesy the artist and 4th Ward Project Space, Chicago.

# MICHIKO ITATANI'S "PERSONAL CODES: VIRTUAL CUBE IN THE KITCHEN"

WEB REVIEW BY ALEX JEN  
4TH WARD PROJECT SPACE

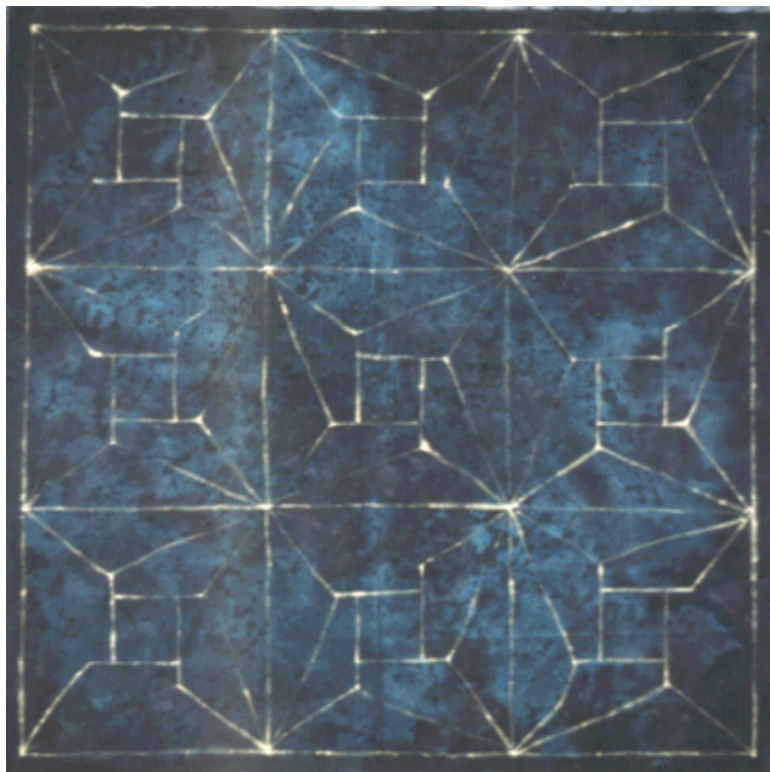


A beguiling precision pervades Michiko Itatani's recent nightscapes at 4th Ward Project Space, most picturing the same facade. Screens and eaves all line up as architecture should, but there is whimsy in the joinery, and several recurring characters—the same faceted rock appears in all 23 paintings, for instance—that displace any assumption of perfectionism. Her fixations are more mysterious, and perhaps can be understood by observing the care with which she paints this house. Layering gouache, Prismacolor marker, and ink, mundane scenes wobble unto mirages under her hand. Shingles appear scalloped across the roof like little waves in water, their usual ornament translated as a row of irregular dots. Windows are filled with splotches of rust-colored light; smudges in the medium become moving shadows. Pickets bleed into each other, as if she held the brush or marker too long in one spot.

A few references are revealed in the text for the exhibition, titled "Personal Codes: Virtual Cube in the Kitchen"—a curiously shaped stone her father found and his family kept in the kitchen, and an encounter with Alberto Giacometti's sole abstract sculpture *Le Cube* (1934, cast 1959)—but for the most part, viewers are left to ponder Itatani's particular domestic obsessions. In *Cosmic Cube 2019-K-16* and *K-18* (both 2019), the screens on the first floor have disappeared, revealing a subdivided hall of tatami mats and receding paper screens. The space is shallow, almost stacked, uncannily cramping and collapsing this home of the mind.

While the paintings are essentially flat, some texture is carried in Itatani's washes of various densities. In *Cosmic Cube 2019-K-06* (2019), brush traces are calcified in the cerulean, starlit sky, preserving an iridescent speed. A metallic plume floats in the air, but does not emanate from any clear chimney or vent. Oddly, only after questioning the smoke's logic did I register the descending, crosshatched lines and floating, atomlike orbs that appear in every painting as otherworldly. It was as if they were camouflaged by repetition.





**MICHIKO ITATANI**, *Untitled*, 1972, oil on canvas, 182.9 × 182.9 cm.



**MICHIKO ITATANI**, *Untitled*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 213.4 × 213.4 cm.

Itatani's preoccupation with the cosmic has been lifelong, present even in her early work, as she tested questions of form and finish. Shortly after arriving in the United States, she began *Movement* (1972–76), a series of large paintings that have a steady gyration about them. An untitled work from 1972 pictures a grid of pinwheels, their outlines worn and glistening like the creases in a sheet of wrapping paper; by 1976, the geometries have disappeared in favor of a few directional swipes. Still, Itatani's gestures circle around something: a void, a possibility, a place to go.

Initially, Itatani wanted to be a fiction writer. After being reprimanded for her naivete by literature professors, she came to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) as a means of going somewhere she had never been, and doing something she had never done. Indeed, for a few years Itatani thought she'd go back to Japan and write about it all, until she realized she was describing the world with images far more than words. Experiments with shaped canvases and their shadows followed into the 1980s and '90s, and in 2000 Itatani began two series of paintings, *Viable Elevation* and *Virtual Landing*. The largest work from the latter extends a shaded, gunmetal-colored catenary across seven vertical canvases; the unpainted concave space is reminiscent of first light creeping across the globe.

A few paintings in "Personal Codes" take a similarly celestial perspective, particularly those focusing on the recurring *Le Cube*, gradually conflated with the stone Itatani's father found. In the aforementioned domestic paintings, the rock shuffles from corner to corner, a wandering character that is perhaps a representation of the watchful artist herself. These works, by contrast, place the form in the forest or floating above the world, the blue sky now black in the vacuum of space. In *Cosmic Geocometti 2018-K-28* (2018), a notably brighter painting that is reminiscent of stained glass, Giacometti's cube becomes a talisman or teleportation device. Rows of dabbed green, goldenrod, and periwinkle paint spin and lock in the background, like dials. Itatani's loose hand and lambent coloring in "Personal Codes" recall the wobbly forms and coral gradient in Georgia O'Keeffe's *Sky Above Clouds IV* (1965), which Itatani would have seen hanging in The Art Institute of Chicago, across the street from the School.

Somewhere among Itatani's interiors and exteriors, I came under the mistaken impression that this was her childhood home in Osaka. When I asked, she faltered, replying, ". . . if I say, then I am a *historical* fiction writer." While Itatani acknowledges her Japanese heritage, she asserts that she is a "made in America" artist, complicating any nostalgic implications of the immigrant narrative. Memory and imagination are never too far apart. In Itatani's splintered brushstrokes, there is building, but rarely settling.



**MICHIKO ITATANI**, *White Night* from *Tesseract Study 2019-K-28*, 2019, gouache, ink, and Prismacolor on board, 20.3 × 20.3 cm.

Michiko Itatani's "[\*Personal Codes: Virtual Cube in the Kitchen\*](#)" was on view at 4th Ward Project Space, Chicago, from September 5 to October 10, 2021.

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